



Involving Parents in Character Education

William Damon, in his work *Greater Expectations* (1995), writes:

The seeds of the moral sense are sown at conception, and its roots are firmly established at birth. Every infant enters this world prepared to respond socially, and in a moral manner, to others. Every child has the capacity to acquire moral character. The necessary emotional response systems, budding cognitive awareness, and personal dispositions are there from the start. Although, unfortunately, not every child grows into a responsible and caring person, the potential to do so is native to every member of the species. (p. 132)

Therefore, barring any neurological issues that hinder thinking and consciousness, every child is born capable of acquiring the attributes and actions that will result in the development of a respectful, responsible, caring person. But having the wiring—the potential—does not mean the child

will acquire such characteristics. It is up to the family, the community, and ultimately the world to help provide the current—examples, exhortations, and expectations of behavior that encourage the habits of action and mind that define a person of good character. In other words, it takes adults to raise children. However, not everyone has recognized the importance the adults play in the formation of the child's character.

In his book *Emile*, French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that children should not be tainted by the adults or the social structures around them. Rousseau dismissed the importance of the adults in the raising of children, at least through adolescence. He maintained that left to their own accord, children will develop into ethically sensitive individuals through their intuitions, experiences, and feelings. Slowly and through stages, the child begins to mature naturally. Only until the child is between the ages of 12 and 15 should he or she be slowly introduced to what we would consider an education that will help the child fit into society. We can clearly argue that the educational needs of a child in the 21st century far exceed what Rousseau could have envisioned. Not starting formal education until age 12 would leave most children poorly prepared to live and thrive in our modern world. However, we cannot discount Rousseau entirely. He correctly gleaned that there are stages of development, and that the child grows into adulthood and is not born a little adult. We can value Rousseau's insights and the role that intuition, experience, and feelings play in the development of the child. But they are not enough to insure the development of the good, ethically sensitive child. After all, left strictly to one's own accords, one may act the majority of time in one's self interest without considering the needs of others. Rousseau may have also gleaned that children have the seed of morality in them, but he failed to recognize the value of interactions with caring adults, educators, and other students in the ethical development of the child. We want our children to grow and learn, to develop inquisitive minds, to explore and learn on their own. Yet we also acknowledge that

it will take the village to raise a child who will take his or her place as a contributing member of society.

This sounds easy enough. If we all work together, children will get their physical, social, emotional, and ethical needs met. Unfortunately this is not always the case. Many families are broken apart. Some children live in dangerous neighborhoods. Some children come into this world with poor social support and are being raised by young mothers with little or no emotional support or financial help from the biological father of the child. Other parent(s) must work several jobs just to provide the basics for the family. Some children live in homes with a great deal of financial benefits but lack emotional support. All of these children are at risk. Some of these children will find a way out of their malady. Their internal compass, nurtured by a few caring adults, will make all the difference. Unfortunately, most kids will need more support from the adults in their communities. These adults may be religious leaders, scout leaders, coaches, foster parents, business and social organizations and, perhaps most importantly, teachers in the student's life who forge a solid relationship with the parent(s) of the child.

With this in mind, we must acknowledge that schools have a critical role to play in the development of the ethical sensibilities of their students. For at least 180 days a year, students, unless they are sick, are in schools. Children on average spend more awake hours with their teachers, five days a week, than with any other adults. However, we cannot take the place of parents, nor should we try to do so. In the best situations, we can reinforce what caring, ethically sensitive parents are trying to inculcate in their children. Unfortunately in far too many cases, educators are the chief character educators as they assist children in forging an ethical conscience. Yet even in these situations, we can acknowledge that our connection with the homes can result in far higher yields than if we go it alone.

Educators must work to establish a solid relationship with their students' parents. The importance of this is being recognized in the development of "small high schools" that are

limiting the number of students in the school, or large schools that try to become “small” by developing various academies within the larger school. Many of these educators will be working with the students for their entire high school career and become conduits between the school and the home. Even if we are in a larger school, a connection between the educators and home can pay positive benefits for everyone. Still, we must go further than just educators. Schools must work with community groups.

Within every community there are community groups that can be marshaled to help schools and parents with the job of raising good children. Some children may need a “Big Sister.” Other students may benefit from joining a service club or a scout troop. Some parents may benefit from parental support groups that are offered through social agencies. In other words, the entire village needs to be networked through the school. Certainly, this sounds a bit grand. But it also makes sense. The school plays a crucial role in the life of the child and also the family. Any family who has struggled with a child’s academics or behavior will testify that what happens at school can influence what occurs at home, just as what occurs at home can affect the child’s performance in school.

The suggestions that follow argue and present examples on how educators can work with parents. We also provide examples of how communities can work with schools and parents in assisting each of these crucial caregivers in helping students grow up to be people of good character. Together, we can make a difference.

References

- Damon, W. (1995). *Greater expectations: Overcoming the culture of indulgence in America’s homes and schools*. New York: The Free Press.
- Rousseau, J. (2007). *Émile, or On Education*. NuVision Publications. (Original work published 1762)



PARENT INVOLVEMENT PRINCIPLE 1

Effective communication with parents facilitates the character education process.

Communication is key in any relationship, and the relationship between a child's school and family is one of the most valuable relationships that can be fostered. Schools need to be proactively communicating with parents regarding all aspects of the child's school-based education. An important part of any education is educating a child in social and ethical competencies. Now, we must acknowledge that the parent is the first and primary social and moral teacher for the child. But the school has a role to play, working with parents in this effort. School staffs interact with students for about seven hours per day. Therefore, we should communicate to parents our efforts to reinforce good character. Recognizing students individually and also collectively is good news that parents enjoy hearing. It also communicates the good behaviors that are happening and the value that we place on them. This in turn compliments the parents and reinforces everyone's efforts.

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Schools already use various means in communicating with parents. Character education information should be included in the established communication methods. Building on this, the committee that is coordinating the character education effort can incorporate new and creative means of communication.

Principle 1 Strategies

- Publish a monthly school newsletter, which is a simple yet powerful communication tool. When drafting the newsletter, consider these suggestions:
 - Place character education information in a prominent location in the newsletter.
 - Provide monthly “at-home” activities to reinforce monthly character values and traits within the school.

- Include the businesses that are supporting the school's character education efforts.
- Share the newsletter with nonprofit organizations that support character education.
- Consider sharing with parents the character-building strategies provided in Appendix A of this book. The strategies, written especially for parents, are taken from Dr. Helen LeGette's book, *Parents, Kids and Character*.
- Use the agenda book to explain the school's character initiative. Be sure to include the code of student conduct and student expectations, and the school's character pledge, values, and/or motto.
- Maintain current, relevant information about the school's character activities on the school Web site. Work character education into all aspects of the school—arts, athletics, academics. For example, a "Coaches Corner" could highlight the efforts of the coaches and athletes to promote good sportsmanship. Also on the Web site, provide ideas and activities for families to reinforce character education at home.
- Phone calls are a quick, effective way to communicate with parents. During routine phone calls, discuss the school's character education initiative with parents; ask for their support and participation.
- Consider sending parents notes that address their children's social and ethical progress. Positive notes are likely to be read and well-received. School staff should be encouraged to send parents notes citing specific examples of student behavior.
- Character education initiatives in a school can do a great deal to influence positive communication with parents. Some schools provide postcards for office staff to quickly sign and send home with students who display polite behavior in the front office. A simple, pre-printed message is sufficient: "Your child visited the front office today. It was a pleasure to speak to such a polite student. Thanks for what you do!"
- Introduce the character initiative to families who are new to the school. Include character education in the orientation for new students and their families and in the materials provided by the parent-teacher organization.



PARENT INVOLVEMENT PRINCIPLE 2

Parents/volunteers are trained to promote the character initiative throughout the school.

We all want parents to volunteer in our schools. Their presence sends a message to their children about service and caring, and to other children that people care about them and are willing to give up their time to help. Important for the parent is

being part of the mission of the school. In other words, parents should also gain a sense of accomplishment regarding the work they are performing for the school.

One way to ensure a positive experience for volunteers is to focus their time and efforts to helping the school meet its

academic and character goals. For example,

a goal for most schools is to assist students who are struggling academically. A volunteer can offer tutoring as well as a sympathetic ear. Another goal every school should have is to improve its learning climate. There is a simple reason for this: the more time teachers have to teach, the greater the possibility students can learn the assigned material. One way to help build a positive climate is to ensure all volunteers understand and are committed to the character education goals of the school. These goals should involve developing a caring, respectful, and responsible learning environment. In order to help achieve this goal, volunteers should be informed of and involved in the school's character education initiative. Through this training, volunteers learn that they will need to be role models as well as academic tutors. The combination of the two—role model and tutor—will help volunteers develop students' intellectual and social/ethical competencies. It will also reinforce what the educators and other stakeholders in the school are modeling and teaching students. In essence, the volunteer will take an active role in helping the school develop students who are smart and good people. To make sure this happens effectively, the school might establish a parent volunteer coordinator. The coordinator would ensure positive experiences for all volunteers, and work as a stakeholder in helping the school achieve its academic and character education goals.

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Principle 2 Strategies

- Have every volunteer read a description of the importance of character education in the life of the school. This should feature what is expected of students and adult stakeholders.
- Hold trainings, led by the school's character education coordinator, to acquaint volunteers with the school's character-building efforts.
- Provide name tags that designate volunteers in the school as Character Coaches. Being a Character Coach entails encouraging students to move through the hallways in an orderly manner and to practice good manners in the cafeteria.
- Ask volunteers at sporting events to serve as Character Coaches, reminding fans to show good sportsmanship in the stands. This can be done via an announcement or a handout given to each person entering the stands.
- Encourage the school's volunteers to recruit others in the community to volunteer to help the school meet its character education goals. This may include a pamphlet to share or leave in businesses, faith communities, or other social gathering spots.
- Consider developing lesson plans for volunteers to use in teaching students. The lessons should be descriptive and sent to volunteers before they come to the school. A school in North Carolina has developed grade-specific lessons that are tied to the regular curriculum and designed to be delivered by volunteers. The advantage of such an approach is that the volunteers do not have to shoulder the responsibility of developing a lesson plan, and the lesson will be aligned with the State's content standards.
- Designate a person in the office to serve as a volunteer coordinator. This will allow time for preparation on the part of the teacher or other stakeholder in the school who will receive assistance from the volunteer.
- Ask a volunteer to greet children as they come into the school. At the middle or high school level, this person can assist in the office or walk through the school's potential trouble spots.

Another friendly voice or calm presence is always valuable, for staff as well as students.

- Recognize volunteers for their efforts. This recognition should involve the students in the school who have benefited from the work of these coaches.



PARENT INVOLVEMENT PRINCIPLE 3

The parent involvement program includes parent forums, school social activities, volunteerism, and parent education workshops.

Parent involvement in schools goes much further than PTA meetings and parent conferences. Reaching our parents is more important than ever to the success of our students.

Indeed, the research tells us that parent involvement in children's learning is positively related to achievement.

Building and maintaining positive, working relationships with the parents in the school community takes effort and creativity. In order to maintain parents' support, initiatives must foster a positive

outlook on the school and assure parents of the well-being and safety of their children. Indeed, it is imperative for all stakeholders to be focused on common goals in order for all students to reach success.

In order for these efforts to be realized, schools need to go above and beyond the typical strategies of parent involvement. Learning needs to be celebrated. Community members need to learn about and learn from one another through social activities. Family members need to be involved in learning and the educational process of the schools. And, most importantly, parents' capacity to support their children in an ever-changing society must continue to grow. This can be achieved through the following strategies.

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Principle 3 Strategies

- Recognize parent volunteers for their time and effort. This can be accomplished by designating special parking spaces, recognizing volunteers' service to the school in the newsletter, holding a luncheon for them, and highlighting their contributions on hallway bulletin boards.
- Allow parents to share their talents with students by inviting them to speak on career day, co-sponsor a club, tutor a struggling student, or share their expertise in the classroom on a curriculum-related topic.
- Invite parents to be guest readers throughout the year and on special days such as Read Across America Day.
- Invite parents to join school committees, especially the character education committee.
- Invite families to participate in a school beautification day before the school year starts. This makes the school a more inviting place for students and builds a sense of community.
- Invite families to attend social functions at the school. This non-threatening interaction may help parents see the school as a place where they would want to volunteer. Some examples of social nights are a fall festival, ice-cream social, book swap, movie night, and talent show.
- Develop a parent committee that meets regularly with the principal to ask questions and voice concerns.
- Provide training for parents on how to support their children in this ever-changing world. Topics may include planning for college, bullying, and drug and gang prevention.
- Involve parents in celebrating the academic success of their children, no matter how small the success.
- Use events that automatically bring parents into the buildings, like concerts or graduation events, to share pertinent information and reinforce the importance of the school's character-building initiatives.
- Offer childcare and explore transportation options to allow more parent participation.

- Showcase student work in conjunction with a parent program.
- Create a needs assessment to determine what parents want to know more about within the school.
- Provide a forum for parents to share concerns and suggestions with the administration.
- Help parents reinforce the character traits, school norms, and school code of conduct by sharing that information with them.
- Consider using student “ambassadors”—students who serve as greeters when parents and guests enter the building or classroom. When choosing greeters, consider those students who rarely get the spotlight.
- Form a committee to welcome parents who are new to the school. (This could be a subcommittee within a current parental involvement committee.)
 - The welcoming committee should communicate to all stakeholders the rights and responsibilities of the school staff, students, and parents. Communication can be made through newsletters, parent meetings, and personal phone calls.
 - The committee should share with parents the appropriate procedures to follow when entering the building (e.g., signing in, wearing name tags).
 - Office staff should play a key role in this committee. They are often the first people visitors meet in the school.